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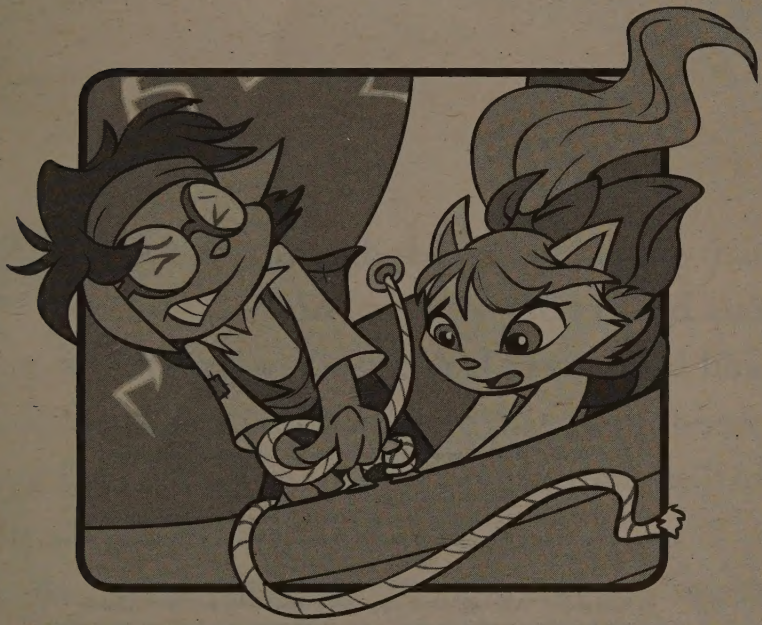

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PROLOGUE

Kyrok flew through the forest, hoping that he was not too late. His good friend and mentor, Professor Vinsjin, had summoned him to his bedside. Kyrok had heard that the professor was ill and didn't know how much time he had left.

As Kyrok flew, he thought of the many adventures he and Professor Vinsjin had shared. He had to reach the professor's house in time. He just had to.

Kyrok's thoughts turned to the duo's greatest

hour, when he and the professor had banished a band of ghouls from Neopia. Their victory had been bittersweet, as Kyrok had sacrificed his life during that battle. But he had later returned to Neopia as a ghost.

Evening descended and the first stars appeared above a small clearing as Kyrok finally reached the small cottage where Professor Vinsjin lived. Kyrok slowly opened the front door. Stepping into the cottage, he moved quickly but quietly to the professor's bedroom.

Knocking softly first, Kyrok opened the bedroom door. "Professor?" he whispered. He received no answer. Fear gripped Kyrok as he stepped closer to the still figure in the bed.

"Oh, no!" he cried. "I'm too late!"

"What? Too late? Too late for what?!" Professor Vinsjin barked, bolting upright in his bed.

Kyrok breathed a sigh of relief. "Professor, it's

good to see you," he said, pulling a small stool over to the bed and sitting down.

"Kyrok, old friend, so good to see you," the professor said. "Thank you for coming by on such short notice."

"You know I would do anything for you, Professor," Kyrok replied.

"My dear boy, I have something to give you," the professor said weakly. Then he pointed to a corner of the room. "Over there, the third floorboard in from the wall. Press it on the far end."

Kyrok hurried across the room, his curiosity piqued. He knelt down and pressed one end of the floorboard. The opposite end popped up revealing a book hidden beneath the floor. Reaching down, Kyrok picked up the book and immediately recognized it.

"Your diary!" he cried, staring at the book that had played such a big part in his life years earlier.

"Yes, my dear boy," the professor said in a

strained voice. "The very book containing the spells we used to banish the ghouls years ago. I want you to have it."

"Me?" Kyrok asked unable to hide his surprise.

"Yes. I am old and weak and we both know that my time grows short," the professor said, stating what Kyrok had hoped to avoid hearing. "That book must not fall into the wrong hands. As you know, its power is too great. And you also know, Kyrok, that there is no one I trust more than you. You must take the diary and keep it safely hidden.

"I'd be honored, Professor," Kyrok said, turning the dusty book over in his hands. He thought of the book's importance in keeping Neopia free from the perils of the ghouls. "And I will keep it hidden and safe."

Professor Vinsjin smiled. The two friends shared a cup of tea, and then it was time for Kyrok to leave.

"Rest easy, Professor," Kyrok said as he left.

"The book is safe with me."

Back at home, Kyrok built a secret compartment behind a wall in his study and slipped the book inside.

Many years passed. One day, long after Professor Vinsjin's death, Kyrok started thinking about the book. He wasn't sure what brought on the thoughts—he hadn't thought about it for years—but for some reason, curiosity, he decided to pull the book from its hiding place.

Opening its dusty cover, Kyrok flipped through the pages. "Hmm, I recall the professor using these spells," he said to himself. "I wonder. . . ."

The more he read the more intrigued he got. "One little spell shouldn't cause any harm," he murmured. Kyrok picked a simple spell of transportation and then concentrated on a cup of tea, which he had left in the next room.

Visualizing the cup in his mind, he shut his eyes tightly and repeated the words of the spell

over and over. When he opened his eyes, the steaming cup of tea was sitting next to him on a small table in the study.

Kyrok smiled. A feeling of satisfaction filled him. He felt happy and powerful. He also had the overwhelming desire to use magic again.

Over the next few weeks, Kyrok took the book from its secret compartment more and more often. He moved items around, helped his garden grow tall, and cleared up rainy days so the town's children could play outside. *These are all harmless spells,* he told himself each time he used the magic. But each time he employed a spell, he felt powerful. And he liked the feeling.

One gloomy, stormy afternoon, Kyrok stood at his window, watching the rain streaming down. He pulled out the book and looked for the spell to part the clouds and open up the sky so the sun could shine through.

Stepping outside, Kyrok began to chant the

spell. The clouds parted and a patch of blue sky shone through. As Kyrok kept chanting he saw a bizarre sight. The blue of the sky seemed to stretch and tear.

Before he could stop it, the sky itself ripped. A huge hole opened in the fabric of the sky. Gray mists swirled in the tear. Amazed and terrified, Kyrok realized that he had gone too far. The sense of power he felt each time he used magic had gotten the best of him.

He started to close the book. Before it shut completely, a powerful force, like a funnel of wind, swept down from the hole in the sky. It ripped the book from Kyrok's hands, sucking it up toward the opening.

Kyrok watched in horror as the book sped skyward, vanishing into the hole. Then the hole disappeared. The sky returned to normal, and the storm moved back in.

But the book was gone.

"*Noooo!*" Kyrok screamed, falling to his knees, wrapping his wings around his head. "What have I done?! How could I have been so foolish? Professor Vinsjin trusted me, and I have betrayed that trust! Now all of Neopia is at risk. The book has fallen into the hands of Gnawthral and his ghouls in the mystic realm. And they will use it to return. No one in Neopia is safe, and it is all my fault!"

CHAPTER ONE

Kyrok opened his eyes slowly. Looking around, he saw that he was camped at the edge of the Haunted Woods. Beside him slept Sarn, a Kacheek, and Liva, a Wocky, the two companions who had joined him on his quest to find Gnawthral, recover Professor Vinsjin's book, and banish the ghouls once again, thus restoring the lands and inhabitants of Neopia to their former peace.

Dawn was breaking and it was time to be on the move. Gently, Kyrok woke his two friends.

"Sarn, Liva, it is time to go," he said as he softly shook each one.

"Go?" Sarn said sleepily, rubbing his eyes and reaching for his glasses. "Go where? Is it time to go home yet?"

"We aren't going home, Sarn," Liva reminded her best friend as she stretched and stood up. "We're going to Terror Mountain to find Gnawthral, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," Sarn said, standing up and brushing the leaves off his back. "Are we going to eat first?"

"Yes," Kyrok said, as they gathered their belongings. "Our first stop is Neopia Central. There we'll get a good meal and pick up some supplies before setting off for the frozen peak of Terror Mountain."

"Great," Sarn replied. "I can't remember the last time I had a good meal."

A short while later, the travelers arrived in Neopia Central, a busy, bustling whirlwind of

activity. Neopets hurried this way and that as Sarn, Liva, and Kyrok made their way past the many shops.

"Wow!" Liva cried. "It looks like you can get anything you want here!"

"*That's* where I want to go!" Sarn shouted, pointing at the Neopia Central Food Shop. "I'm starving!"

"And I'm relieved," Kyrok added, looking around as the trio headed for the food shop. "I see no sign that the ghouls have reached this place."

Inside the food shop, Sarn bought a giant bowl of stew and Liva chose the shop's special "everything" sandwich. Kyrok sat, rubbing his chin and thinking about the long journey ahead.

"Nothing for you, Kyrok?" Sarn asked through a mouthful of stew.

"Haven't you noticed that Kyrok never eats?" Liva asked. "He's a ghost, remember? And ghosts don't eat."

"Oh, yeah," Sarn mumbled. "Sometimes I forget that."

"I could howl and scare you again like when we first met," Kyrok suggested, smiling.

"Funny," Sarn replied, shoving another spoonful into his mouth. "So where is this Terror Mountain anyway?"

"Across the sea," Kyrok explained. "Several days' sailing from this shore. Once we get our supplies, we will have to locate a boat."

"I've never been sailing," Sarn said. "Is it hard?"

"Not for a brave Kacheek like you," Kyrok replied, smiling again.

Sarn nodded and dove back into eating his stew.

When Sarn and Liva finished their main dish, they each moved on to a slice of jumbleberry pie for dessert. Liva's eyes grew misty at the sight of her beloved grandfather's favorite treat. She thought of all the slices of jumbleberry pie

she had shared with him ever since she was a little girl. She lifted a forkful to her mouth, then dropped it back onto the plate.

"It'll be all right, Liva," Sarn said, knowing exactly what was upsetting her. "I promised your grandfather that we would help him get free from the ghouls' spell. And we will."

Liva and the others had found her grandfather, Cramdill, in the Haunted Woods, along with several other Neopets. They had all been attacked by the ghouls and were frozen like statues. Liva and her friends were helpless to free them. They would remain frozen until Gnawthral and the rest of the ghouls were banished from Neopia.

"Come, we must gather supplies before our long journey," Kyrok said, standing up. The others followed him out of the shop and into the crowded Neopian Plaza.

At the Healthy Food Shop, the group loaded up on things that would keep well during the journey ahead: pineapple juice, trail mix,

protein bars, and granola bars.

"No hot stew for you for a while, I'm afraid," Kyrok said to Sarn.

Next they went into a general supply shop.

"Now, you two pick out some warm jackets, hats, and gloves," Kyrok said. "With its fierce blizzards and steep ice cliffs, Terror Mountain is no place to be without proper protection from the wind and cold."

As Sarn and Liva tried on heavy coats, Kyrok gathered torches to light their way for night travel, plus backpacks, sleeping bags, and blankets. Sleeping on the damp ground of the Haunted Woods had been uncomfortable—even for a ghost.

"Do you know where we might find a seaworthy boat?" Kyrok asked the old Bori who ran the shop.

"A boat, you say?" the Bori repeated. "Don't carry them myself. Nearest water is miles away. Hmm, your best bet would be Kiko Lake.

Lots of boats there. I'm sure the Kikos who live there could find something for you. Heading out to do a little fishing, are ya?"

"Something like that," Kyrok replied, realizing that the Neopets of this town really had been spared the horror that was creeping throughout Neopia. "Thanks."

With backpacks and sleeping bags slung onto their backs, warm clothes and blankets rolled up and slipped into their packs, and their food and other supplies neatly tucked away, Kyrok, Liva, and Sarn headed out of Neopian Plaza.

"How far is Kiko Lake?" Sarn asked, already feeling weighed down by his heavy load. He was happy to have food and warm clothes and a sleeping bag, but not so thrilled when he realized that he would have to carry it all the way to Terror Mountain.

"We should make it there before nightfall," Kyrok replied.

"Nightfall! That's hours from now!" Sarn complained. "That's a long way to lug all this stuff! Hey, maybe I can use a drop of the Elixir of Levitation to lighten the load!" He fingered the potions in his small leather pouch.

Kyrok stopped and turned toward Sarn. "That would be a wasteful use of a powerful potion," he explained. "Your potions are for true emergencies only!" Then he turned and led the group forward, shaking his head.

Sarn had taken four potions from the magician Quonsar's cave: the Elixir of Levitation, the Potion of Enlargement, the Tincture of Strength, and the Tonic of Invisibility. Unfortunately, he had used all of the Tonic of Invisibility during his first encounter with the ghouls. A sip of the Tincture of Strength had saved him from being frozen in Gnawthral's clutches. And a dose of the Elixir of Levitation had helped him escape from the Deserted Fairground. Sarn shifted the weight

of the pack on his back and trudged along.

"I hope we come back this way, through Neopia Central," Liva said when they had reached the edge of the town. "I like this place. It's exciting, but in a good way."

"I think we—"

Kyrok stopped suddenly at the sound of a commotion behind him.

"Monster!" came the terrified cry from a Gelert who had been relaxing near the Rainbow Pool.

Kyrok spun around and spotted a hideous creature tromping toward the Gelert.

"GHOUL!" he shouted.

Reptilian skin dangled in pieces from the creature's thick, puffy face. Its misshapen body made a sickening sloshing noise as the creature closed in on the stunned Gelert.

Panic swept through the normally peaceful town. Terrified townsfolk fled in every direction.

Within seconds, the once-crowded streets were empty.

The Neopets who lived here had heard rumors of the ghoul invasion, but so far they had been spared direct attacks. That time was now over.

CHAPTER TWO

Stumbling backward with fear, the Gelert tumbled to the ground.

"You're mine!" growled the ghoul, reaching down and grabbing the petrified Gelert by the shoulders, clasping him in a powerful grip.

The ghoul began chanting:

Power of darkness, bringer of rage
Remove this life force from its natural cage.

"The chant!" Sarn gasped. "He's going to freeze

that Gelert and steal his life force."

The ghoul continued:

And when the theft is finished, your strength from you drains—

"Sarn, Liva, each of you grab one of the ghoul's arms," Kyrok shouted. "Distract him. I'll do the rest."

"But what—" before Sarn could finish his question, Kyrok had vanished, turning invisible right before their eyes. "Oh, right, that. Hurry, Liva. He's almost through the chant!"

Liva and Sarn dashed over to the ghoul, each grabbing one of his arms.

I shall vanish like a shadow, but—

"What?" cried the ghoul, stopping mid chant.

The ghoul lifted his arms swiftly, easily tossing Sarn and Liva aside. But in doing so,

he had to let go of the Gelert, and his paralyzing chant was left incomplete. As the ghoul reached down to grab the Gelert and start chanting again, an unseen foot caught him in the jaw, driving him backward.

"Ahhh!" the ghoul screeched, landing hard on the ground. "What was that?"

Sarn reached into his pouch and pulled out the tiny bottle labeled TINCTURE OF STRENGTH. He took a small sip just as the ghoul scrambled back to his feet and rushed toward Liva.

The ghoul raised a clawed hand and swung at Liva. She rolled out of the way and the sharp claw slammed into the dirt.

Sarn grabbed the ghoul's leg.

"All right, I'll deal with you first, Kacheek!" the ghoul raged.

Sarn felt incredible strength coursing through his body. He lifted the ghoul, then spun him around faster and faster. Then he let go.

"Waaaa!" the ghoul screamed as he flew

through the air and crashed into a tree. Stunned and in pain, the ghoul stumbled back toward the Haunted Woods, from where he had come.

"Thank you," the still trembling Gelert said as Kyrok rematerialized.

"Well done, Sarn and Liva," Kyrok said.

A crowd began forming around the three heroes.

"What does this mean?" asked a frightened Acara, as her tiny children huddled around her.

"It means that the ghoul invasion has spread to Neopia Central," Kyrok said sadly. "And it means that our quest is now more urgent than ever!"

Leaving behind a town now gripped with fear, Kyrok, Liva, and Sarn made their way out of Neopia Central and headed for Kiko Lake.

How many more places, how many more Neopets will fall to the ghouls because of my foolishness! Kyrok thought as the three hurried from the town.

CHAPTER THREE

The trio remained silent during the long hike to Kiko Lake. There was nothing to say. They all knew what they had to do and exactly how much was at stake.

The flat, open terrain made the hiking fairly easy, a pleasant change from the gloomy, closed-in paths they had traveled through the Haunted Woods. It also made it easy to spot anyone or anything that might approach them.

As dusk closed in, they caught site of a shimmering lake. Red-and-orange streaks from

the setting sun reflected off the surface.

"Uh, this may be a dumb question, but are there any Kikos at Kiko Lake?" Sarn asked, looking around at the beautiful but deserted lake.

"They are here, Sarn," Kyrok explained. "Thousands of them. Only they live under the water's surface. Look."

Sarn peered down into the crystal clear water. "Wow!" he cried. "There's a whole village down there."

"That's amazing!" Liva added, stepping up next to Sarn and looking into the lake.

"Um, another dumb question," Sarn said. "How do we get down there?"

Before Kyrok could answer, he spotted a rippling in the water, as if something was swimming just below the surface.

"What's that?" Sarn asked, squinting for a better look.

"Maybe it's someone coming to welcome us," Liva said hopefully.

THWOOSH!

Something enormous burst from the lake, sending water spraying in every direction.

"It's a lake monster!" Sarn cried, backing away. "A giant Tanizard!"

The creature's slender, snakelike body floated on the lake's surface. Its long, scaly neck rose high out of the water. Atop the thick neck sat a large head with a long snout. Its skinny tail came to a sharp point and thrashed about the water's surface.

"So much for getting a boat here!" Sarn cried.

The creature swam slowly toward the shore. With the rest of its body remaining in the water, the serpent lifted its huge head out of the water and rested it on the shoreline. Then it opened its jaws wide.

Sarn and Liva jumped back away from the shore.

But the enormous Tanizard made no move to attack. It didn't move at all.

Kyrok stared curiously into the creature's cavernous mouth, which looked like a living cave. Then the Tanizard let out a low moan.

"He doesn't sound all that ferocious," Liva said. "It's not like he's roaring or anything. He doesn't even seem to be trying to scare us."

Again the creature let out a deep groaning sound.

"I think he wants us to climb in," Kyrok said, stepping close to the gaping jaws.

"Climb in where?" Sarn asked anxiously.

"Into his mouth," Kyrok explained.

"You want us to walk right into that thing's mouth!" Sarn cried. "No thanks. I don't think I'm ready to become a Tanizard's dinner!"

"No, Sarn," said Liva. "I think Kyrok's right." She moved closer to the Tanizard's massive head. Carefully, she reached up and

laid a hand on its cheek and gently began to stroke it. The creature let out another groan, this one softer than the first.

"It's like he's purring!" Liva exclaimed. "He's just a big cutie. Yes, you are, aren't you?"

"Cutie!" Sarn cried. "He looks like he could gobble the three of us up in one big bite and still have room left over to drink half this lake!"

"You wouldn't eat us, now would you?" Liva cooed. As she continued to pet the serpent, it wagged its tail, which splashed up and down in the water.

"Then why is its mouth open wide!" Sarn shouted.

"Because he wants to bring us down to the Kikos' village," Kyrok said, laughing. "Don't you see? He's offering us a ride. Come on. We'll be safe in his mouth. It will protect us from the water. I'm sure of it."

They left their packs and supplies on the shore and Liva stepped in first.

"Be careful, Liva!" Sarn cautioned, fully expecting the massive jaws to clamp down and devour his best friend. But the serpent's mouth remained wide open.

Kyrok went in next. And again the mouth stayed open. "Come on, Sarn. We're wasting time!" Kyrok said.

Sarn hesitated. "If that thing eats me, I'll never speak to you again!" he exclaimed. He put his right foot onto the creature's tongue, then stepped completely inside its mouth.

"Yuk, it's all wet and squishy in here!" he complained.

"It's a mouth, Sarn," Liva said impatiently. "What do you expect?"

The Tanizard closed its mouth and darkness surrounded the three friends. They felt a sudden movement, then heard a loud splash.

"We're underwater!" Kyrok said in amazement. "And we can breathe in here. You see, Sarn, this creature means us no harm.

He is obviously used by the Kikos to bring visitors down to their underwater world."

Sarn stood in the darkness and listened to the sound of water rushing past. After a short ride, he felt the Tanizard slowing down, then stopping. The creature opened its mouth slightly and a small stream of water poured in. Then a tiny, round Kiko slipped into the Tanizard's mouth.

"Ah, visitors," the Kiko chirped. "I love getting visitors. I trust that Draylox kept you comfortable and dry during your ride."

"Yes," Kyrok replied. "We're fine, uh. . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry, how rude of me. I am Fuff, Mayor of Kiko Village." Fuff reached into a bag and pulled out two masks. He could tell right away that Kyrok was a ghost and didn't need one. "Here," he told Liva and Sarn. "Put these on. They will allow you to breathe underwater. Then we can continue this conversation in a more comfortable place."

"Mmm," moaned Draylox the serpent, sounding slightly annoyed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Draylox," Fuff said quickly. "I don't mean to imply that your mouth isn't wonderfully comfortable. And thank you for bringing our guests."

When Sarn and Liva had slipped on their masks, Draylox opened his mouth a bit more. It filled gradually with water and soon the three travelers found themselves floating. They moved easily, following Fuff out of the serpent's mouth and then along the bottom of Kiko Lake. Thanks to the masks, they could breathe underwater easily, although talking was impossible while the masks were secured tightly over their noses and mouths.

"Beautiful!" Kyrok exclaimed as he swam along. Then he noticed the startled looks behind Liva and Sarn's masks. "I can speak underwater as well."

They drifted past beautiful houses and

shops, all crafted from colorful coral. Delicate seaweed gardens waved in the currents, and happy-looking Kikos smiled at the visitors as they floated by. A tall ridge of coral ran all along the lake bottom, like an underwater mountain range.

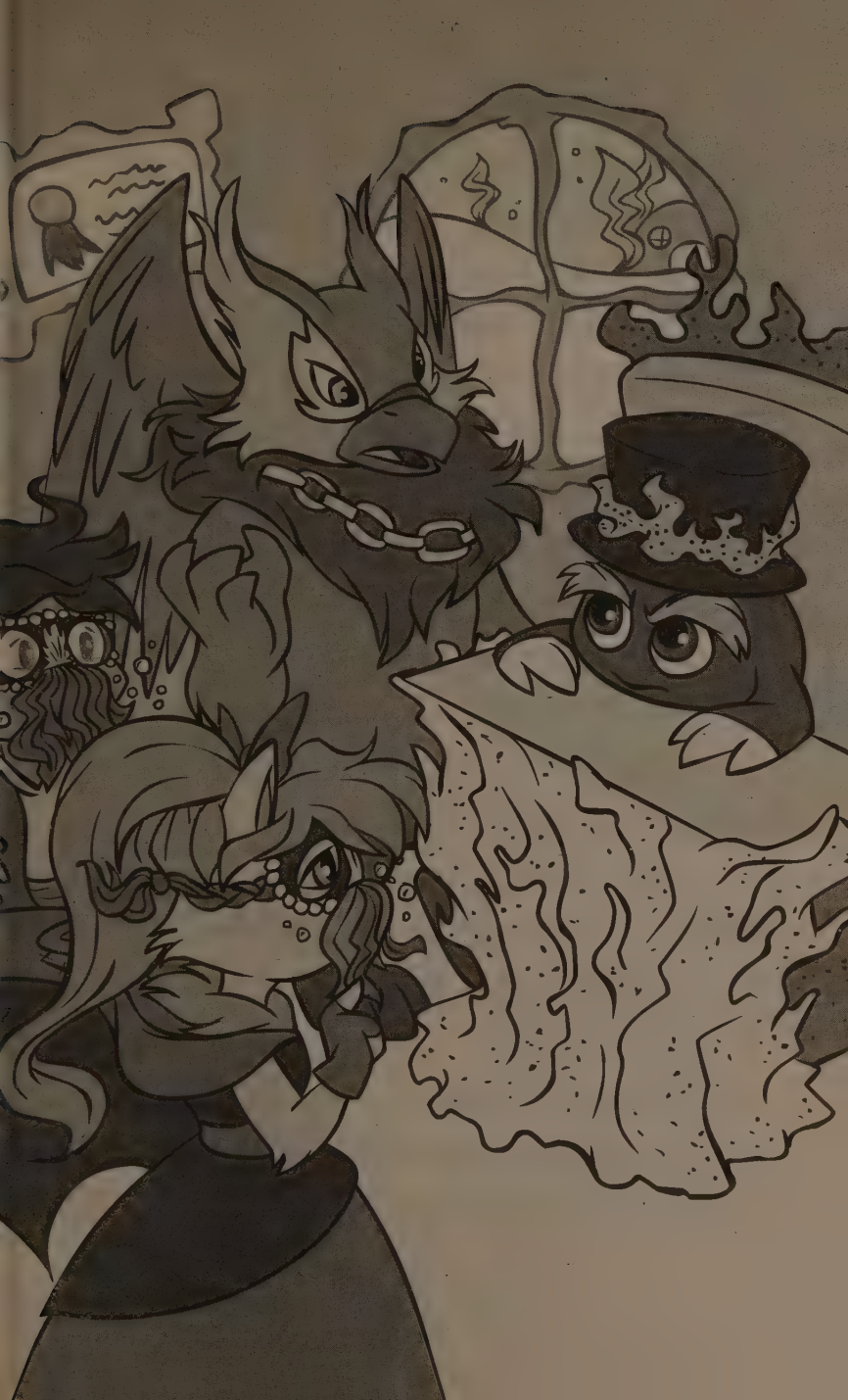
The trio soon came to a large coral building. Swimming inside, they found themselves in the mayor's office. He slipped behind his desk—made from coral, naturally—and turned to his guests.

"Now then," Mayor Fuff said, "what brings you to our village?"

Kyrok quickly filled in Fuff on the purpose of their quest and the danger all of Neopia now faced.

"Ghouls, you say," Mayor Fuff said after Kyrok had finished his tale. "That is terrible."

"Have you seen any around here?" Kyrok asked, although he saw absolutely no sign that the Kikos had been affected by the spreading invasion.



"No, no, my friends," Fuff replied. "You see we Kikos learned years ago that ghouls hate large bodies of water. Won't go near them. As long as our village remains at the bottom of a lake we will be fine. However, we very much view ourselves as citizens of this world. So, what can we do to help?"

"We need a boat," Kyrok explained. "A seaworthy ship big enough for the three of us, for a voyage to Terror Mountain."

"A boat, you say," the mayor repeated, rubbing his furry chin. "Well, I think that can be arranged. Come with me."

Fuff led them to the village shipyard. Kiko Lake was very large and Kikos often used boats to travel from one side to the other, sailing across the lake's surface.

"Here now, this should do," Fuff said, pointing to a small but sturdy-looking sailboat. "Let me give you a hand with that."

When the boat had been pulled from the shipyard, Fuff took out a long, angular horn, which let out a deep-sounding blast. A few seconds later, Draylox returned and opened his jaws wide. Kyrok, Sarn, and Liva guided the boat into the serpent's enormous mouth, then climbed in themselves.

"Thank you, Mayor Fuff," Kyrok said. "Your generosity has brought us one step closer to stopping this terrible evil and saving Neopia."

"Follow the shoreline of the lake to the north," Fuff said, waving good-bye as Draylox slowly closed his mouth. "That will lead you out to the open sea. And do come back and see us once you have completed your task. Try to make it back for the coral festival. Quite a good time indeed."

The serpent's mouth closed and he took off for the surface. After another short ride, Draylox burst from the lake, landing with his

huge head on the shore. He opened his mouth, allowing the water to drain out. Then Sarn and Liva removed their masks, pulled the boat out onto the surface of the lake, and scrambled ashore.

"Thanks for the ride, Draylox," Sarn said, happy to once again be back on land. "And thanks for not eating me."

Draylox purred and licked Sarn's face with the end of his enormous tongue.

"Yuk!" Sarn cried. "Tanizard spit!"

Liva laughed out loud.

Then Draylox turned and dove back into the lake.

Kyrok looked up at the star-filled sky as he tied one end of a rope to the boat and the other end to a tree on the shore. The sailing ship bobbed up and down in the ripples of the lake.

"We'll camp here at the edge of the lake tonight," Kyrok said, retrieving his pack as Sarn

and Liva dried off. Unrolling his sleeping bag, he continued, "We'll leave at first light. We should be safe here, knowing now how much ghouls hate water. Get some rest, you two. We have a long and dangerous sea voyage ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

As dawn broke the following morning, the three travelers packed up their camp and loaded their supplies into the boat. Climbing in and casting off the rope, Kyrok and Sarn unfurled the main sail. Liva sat in the back using the rudder to steer. A stiff breeze started them on their journey.

"We'll stick to the shoreline heading north as Fuff recommended," Kyrok said, as he adjusted the sail. "Don't drift too close to the shore, Liva. By midday we should be clear of the lake and

out onto the open sea."

The wind was brisk and the sailboat zipped along at a fast pace. But the ride was smooth and by midmorning Sarn found he was relaxed—and hungry. "Breakfast anyone?" he asked, opening up his backpack. "We've got protein bars, trail mix, and granola bars. Sounds like breakfast to me. Liva?"

"Sure," Liva replied. "I could eat." Sarn tossed her a protein bar.

"Sure you won't eat anything?" Sarn asked Kyrok.

"Yes, Sarn," Kyrok said patiently. "I'm sure. I don't eat."

"Weird," Sarn muttered, popping a handful of trail mix into his mouth.

By late morning they reached a small channel where the lake emptied out into the sea.

"Hang on!" Kyrok shouted as the winds picked up and the gentle rippling of the lake's surface gave way to foamy ocean swells. "The

ride's going to be rougher from here on out!"

Up and down they bounced, riding the waves. The shore of Kiko Lake quickly vanished from view and choppy open ocean surrounded them on all sides.

"Is it going to be this bumpy the whole way to Terror Mountain?" Sarn asked, firmly gripping the side of the boat.

"No!" Kyrok yelled to be heard over the wind, which picked up in strength and began howling.

"Good," Sarn shouted back.

"It's going to get bumpier!" Kyrok announced, pointing to the sky ahead. "Look!"

A thick black thunderhead loomed before them. The sky ahead was filled with dark clouds and flashes of lightning.

"Suddenly that Tanizard's mouth doesn't look so bad after all!" Sarn said, tightening his grip on the edge of the boat.

"Liva! Sarn! Help me cover our supplies with

this tarp to keep them dry!" Kyrok shouted, hustling into action. He and Liva pushed their packs and sleeping rolls into the center of the boat. Sarn rolled out a waterproof tarp, which the others helped him open.

The tarp flapped in the roaring wind, as the trio fought to secure it over their belongings, then attach it with clips to metal rings on the bottom of the boat. Struggling to hold it down, they finally got the tarp secured.

Just then the first drops of rain began to fall.

"Can we navigate around the storm?" Liva asked hopefully.

Kyrok looked up into the now-steady rain. "It doesn't look like it," he replied, as water started sloshing around in the bottom of the boat. "The storm stretches as far as I can see in both directions. We'll have to ride through it. Hang on, both of you!"

The rain started pouring down even harder and the wind picked up. The boat's main sail

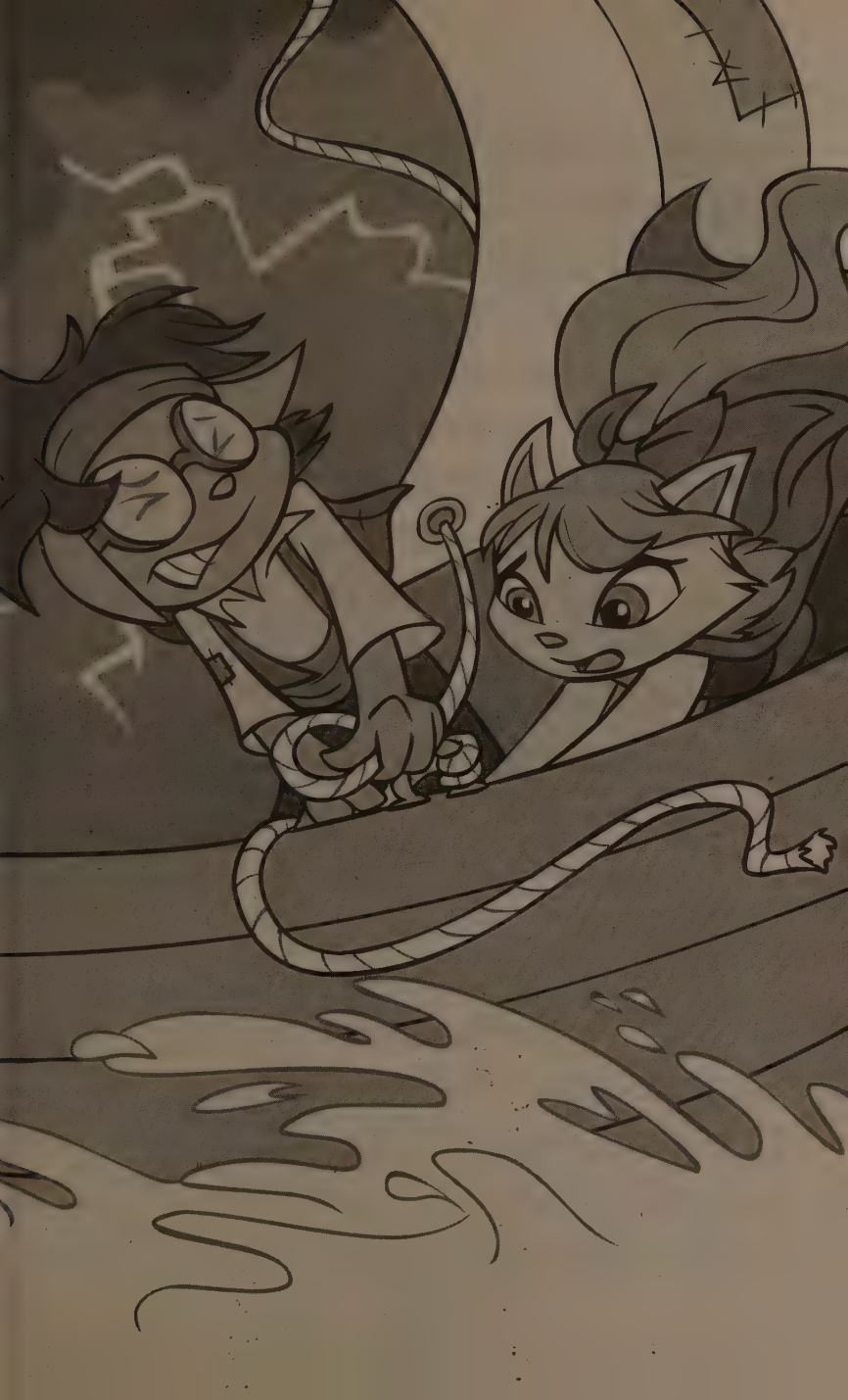
began flapping wildly, looking as if it might tear away at any moment.

"Both of you, grab the bottom of the sail!" Kyrok shouted. With the raging wind assaulting their ears, the three travelers could barely hear each other.

"But what about the rudder!" Liva yelled as drenching sheets of water pummeled her face. "If I let go we won't be able to steer."

"If we lose the sail, steering won't matter!" Kyrok shouted back.

Liva bolted from her seat in the back of the boat, tying a line to the boat's mast as she struggled to maintain her balance. "Tie this around your waists!" she yelled, tossing out the line. The three friends gripped the bottom of the sail as they tied the line from the mast to themselves, battling the wind, and hoping they could pass through the storm before it destroyed their tiny ship.



Back and forth they thrashed as enormous churning waves crashed into them. The tiny boat began to fill up with water.

"Liva, grab that bucket and start bailing out the water!" Kyrok cried.

Liva jumped up and grabbed a bucket, which had been rolling around on the deck. Frantically she began scooping water into the bucket and tossing it back out into the roiling sea. But for each bucket of water she tossed out, twice as much rain poured into the boat.

"It's no use," she cried. "I can't get the water out fast enough."

"Hey! What's that?" Sarn asked suddenly, pointing into the distance.

Kyrok peered through the nearly solid curtain of rain. "It looks like land!" he exclaimed. "If we can get ashore maybe we can wait out the storm! Liva, get back to the rudder and try to steer us toward that land."

Liva sloshed through the water filling up

the bottom of the boat and took her seat at the rudder. She pulled hard, trying to turn the boat toward the shore that now began receding from view. But as hard as she struggled, the ocean waves were too powerful for her.

"I can't budge it!" she cried.

"Sarn, give her a hand!" Kyrok yelled. "We've got to make it to land or we're doomed for certain."

Sarn scrambled to the back of the boat and grasped the rudder's handle. But even with Sarn and Liva pulling together, the rudder still would not move. "It's no use!" Sarn cried. "I'm not strong enough."

"Sarn, do you have any more of that Tincture of Strength left?" Kyrok shouted.

Releasing the rudder, Sarn tore open his pouch. Fumbling around among the three remaining bottles, he pulled out the one labeled TINCTURE OF STRENGTH.

"There's only enough for one more dose!" Sarn

called back. "I've used it a few times already!"

"Drink it! Drink the last dose!" Kyrok ordered.

"But then I won't have any left when we get to Terror Mountain!" Sarn worried aloud.

"We won't be getting anywhere if we can't steer this boat to shore!" Kyrok yelled back.

Realizing that Kyrok was right, Sarn gulped down the final dose of the tincture.

Instantly, he felt power surging through all his muscles. "You go help Kyrok with the sail, Liva," Sarn said. "I've got this."

Liva hurried to the sail.

Handling the rudder by himself, Sarn forced the handle to the right. He felt the boat turn to the left. "It's working!" he cried. He did his best to keep the boat on course as the shoreline came back into view.

Then, just when Sarn thought it couldn't rain any harder, the downpour picked up, blinding

him. The wind raised monstrous waves that tossed the boat around like a child's toy.

Into the air they flew. When they crashed back into the sea, Sarn was slammed against the side of the boat. The last thing he saw was the rudder's handle swinging toward him. Then everything went black.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sarn opened his eyes slowly and found himself staring up into the blazing sun. Realizing that he was stretched out on his back, he lifted his head and looked down toward his feet, only to discover that they were in water.

As his brain tried to make sense of all this, he suddenly remembered the boat and the storm and—

"Liva!" Sarn cried, bouncing to his feet and realizing just how sore his body was. He felt as if he had just been blasted by the Snowager, but

then realized that he had been bounced around violently by the storm and had obviously landed here—wherever here was.

Glancing around, he saw that he was on a beach, looking out at the now-calm sea. Behind him past the narrow strip of beach rose a thick forest some distance from the water.

"Liva! Kyrok!" he called, peering down the beach.

"Sarn," a weak voice cried from behind him. Spinning around he saw Liva and Kyrok stretched out on the ground surrounded by the remains of their boat.

He got to Liva first. She had just lifted herself up onto one elbow and was wiping the sand and water from her face when Sarn reached her.

"Are you okay?" he cried.

"I think so," she said as Sarn helped her to her feet. "Where's Kyrok?"

"Over there," Sarn shouted pointing a short

distance away. The two hurried over to their friend.

"Kyrok!" Liva cried. The ghost stirred then bolted upright in a panic.

"Hmm? Professor, I'm sorry I—What? What happened? Where are we?"

"I woke up first," Sarn reported, "down at the edge of the beach, then found you two up here."

"We've been shipwrecked," Kyrok announced, scrambling to his feet and hurrying over to the boat. "The storm must have crashed us onto this island."

He surveyed the damage to the boat. "The mast is snapped off and there are a few pieces missing from the side and bottom. We're not going anywhere until we figure out a way to fix the boat!"

"Where are we?" Liva asked.

As if in answer to her question, someone came running out of the forest at that moment.

"Help me!" shouted the terrified Neopet. "He's after me!"

"A Blumaroo!" Sarn cried.

"Of course," Kyrok said. "We've crashed onto Roo Island."

"I wonder what he's so upset about," Liva said.

Again, her answer came bursting out of the forest.

"A ghoul!" Sarn cried. "He's being attacked by a ghoul!"

The snarling creature followed close on the heels of the terrified Blumaroo.

"We've got to help him!" Liva shouted.

"Of course we do," Kyrok replied. Then he turned and shouted at the Blumaroo. "Blumaroo! Friend! Dive into the ocean. You'll be safe there!"

Without turning back to check on the ghoul's progress, the Blumaroo ran straight into the sea. He floated among the shallow waves.

Reaching the water's edge, the ghoul shrieked in frustration. Then he turned to attack a more convenient target—Sarn, Liva, and Kyrok!

"I have an idea!" Sarn shouted. He snatched the bucket from what was left of the boat. Somehow it had survived the storm and the shipwreck. Sarn dashed down to the water's edge, filled the bucket, and turned back toward his friends.

Kyrok had vanished, and Liva was now in the ghoul's clutches. The creature was dragging her away from the water, back toward the forest.

As Sarn raced back to help Liva, he heard the ghoul begin chanting:

Power of darkness, bringer of rage—

"No!" Sarn shouted. "Let her go!"

Liva struggled helplessly against the ghoul's powerful grip. He continued to chant:

Remove this life force from its natural cage.

SPLOOSH!

Sarn tossed the bucket of water right in the ghoul's face.

"I said let her go!" Sarn cried as water dripped from the ghoul's greenish-brown skin.

The ghoul jumped back in shock, releasing Liva. She dashed to her best friend's side.

Then the ghoul began to laugh. "Do you think I'm afraid of a bucket of water? Ha-Ha!" he cackled. "I may not enjoy a dip in the ocean like that Blumaroo, but a little bucket of water can't stop me!"

With surprising speed the ghoul chased after Sarn and Liva, who ran toward the water.

Kyrok was still nowhere to be seen, but suddenly they heard his voice in their ears. "When you get to the water, stop and turn back," he hissed. "Then just as the ghoul reaches you, step to either side. I'll do the rest."

Sarn and Liva reached the shoreline. They stopped and turned around. The ghoul was right on their heels.

"Now!" shouted Kyrok. Sarn and Liva dove to either side. The ghoul tried to slow down, but a pair of invisible hands shoved him from behind, sending him flying into the water.

"Ahh!" the ghoul screeched in panic, desperately scrambling back to shore. His skin steaming, he crawled from the ocean then stumbled in a daze back into the forest, whimpering and clawing at his flesh.

"Boy, Fuff wasn't kidding," Sarn said to Liva and Kyrok, who now reappeared. "He really does hate the water."

"It's all right!" Kyrok called out to the Blumaroo, who was still floating on the waves. "It's safe now."

The Blumaroo swam to shore. "Thank you," he said. "You saved me. So many Blumaroos have been frozen. Our entire island is in grave peril."

Liva extended her hand. "I'm Liva," she began. "And this is Sarn and Kyrok."

"I'm Whelar, and I can't thank you enough. If there's anything I can do for you, I'm at your service."

"As a matter of fact, we need to repair our boat," Kyrok explained, pointing to their shipwreck.

"Of course," Whelar replied eagerly. "We have tools and lumber. We can make that ship seaworthy in no time! Come with me. This way, through the Southern Forest."

Constantly alert to the threat of a ghoul attack, the three travelers followed Whelar off the beach, through the forest, and to the center of the island. Sarn was horrified to see many Blumaroos frozen like statues, evidence that the ghouls had indeed been preying on the island.

Kyrok's heart sank at the sight of so many frozen Neopets.

"The ghouls can strike anytime, anyplace,"

Whelar said. "Sometimes we'll go days with no attacks. Other times it's one after another."

The group walked on, and after a while a faint tinkling sound reached Sarn's ears. "Does anyone else hear music?" he asked.

"Ah, that's the merry-go-round," Whelar replied. "Not many people riding it these days, but we keep it running anyway. A reminder of happier times."

Sarn was surprised to find a smile spreading over his face. He had always loved merry-go-rounds, with their promise of excitement all packaged up with a safe little bow.

A moment later, they found themselves in front of the colorful merry-go-round. Cheery music blared from the ride. The brightly painted wooden Unis went up and down as they spun around and around.

Sarn looked at his companions eagerly. "Do we have time for one ride?" he asked.

Kyrok shook his head. "Have you forgotten

our mission, Sarn?" he said sharply. "We've lost precious time already. We've got to get our boat fixed and be on our way."

"Okay, okay," Sarn said, sighing. "I only wanted one ride."

Sarn slowed down and Liva fell back with him. Kyrok and Whelar walked a few steps ahead.

"Ugh, he's grouchy today, isn't he?" Sarn whispered to Liva.

"He just feels like it's up to him to save Neopia," Liva explained. "He's under a lot of pressure."

"I know," Sarn said. "Still, it's just one ride."

"Maybe after we get the boat fixed," Liva said, smiling, hoping to keep Sarn's spirit up.

"Ah, here we are," Whelar said.

The group had reached the Dice-a-Roo parlor, once the most popular spot on Roo Island and a favorite of game lovers all over Neopia.

"Before the ghoul attacks began, visitors from all over Neopia would flock here to play the games

of Dice-a-Roo," Whelar said as the trio headed inside. "But now. . . ." his voice trailed off.

Inside the parlor the mood was grim. A few players partook of Dice-a-Roo games, but most of the Neopets huddled in small groups, discussing what to do about the many ghoul attacks.

"You should have seen the way this place used to be," Whelar said sadly. "Why, we could barely move through the crowds. And the noise! Wonderful, happy noise. But now. . . ." he repeated.

Whelar led the group through the large gaming area, past empty tables. Then he spotted someone.

"Ah, there he is," he said pointing to a Blumaroo near one of the dice tables. "Angebar, my cousin. Excellent carpenter. He'll be able to help you fix your boat."

The group approached Angebar. Whelar made the introductions and filled his cousin in on the travelers' predicament.

"A sailing vessel, you say?" Angebar asked Kyrok. "Busted mast and dented stern. No problem. We'll get you fixed right up!"

"Thank you," Kyrok said. "You are doing a great service to Roo Island and to all of Neo—"

Kyrok stopped suddenly at the sound of some kind of commotion going on outside. "What's happening?" he cried.

"Let's go find out!" Whelar said.

As the group raced through the casino, Sarn heard the unmistakable sound of chanting growing louder with each step he took.

"Ghouls!" Sarn shouted.

CHAPTER SIX

Running at top speed, they approached the parlor door.

The chanting continued.

The group burst from the dark casino out into blazing sunshine. There they saw a ghoul with a Blumaroo firmly in his grasp. He was about to finish his chant.

Sarn ran as fast as he could, not sure what he would do when he reached the ghoul, just knowing that he had to stop him.

But he was too late.

As Sarn watched in horror, the ghoul completed his chant and the color drained from the bright blue Blumaroo. His blue fur faded to white, his face turned pale, and his once-gleaming eyes sunk into a blank stare.

As the Blumaroo's life force drained from his body, the ghoul seemed to grow in size. His body glowed with energy. Then the ghoul turned and ran off into the forest.

Sarn reached the Blumaroo who had been attacked.

"Are you okay?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

The frozen Blumaroo could only moan a weak reply.

"This is what we face every day!" Whelar cried. "They must be stopped."

"Then let's hurry and fix up our boat," Kyrok said firmly. "The sooner we are on our way, the sooner we can put an end to this nightmare."

Kyrok, Sarn, Liva, Whelar, and Angebar

hurried to Angebar's workshop. There they gathered up the tools and lumber they would need to fix the boat. Then the group headed back to the beach to begin their repairs.

Having frozen the Blumaroo, the ghoul raced out of the town center, heading north, away from the forest, toward a cluster of buildings on the northern end of Roo Island. Energy pulsed through his veins. He felt more alert and alive than he had for weeks.

"There you are, Vizjek!" cried another ghoul, who stepped out from behind a building "I've been searching for hours. Where have you been?"

"In town, Rak," Vizjek replied, as the two ghouls ducked into an abandoned building. "I couldn't help myself. All of this hiding and waiting wore me out."

"You froze one of the locals, didn't you?" Rak raged. "I can see it in your face."

"Just one," Vizjek replied sheepishly.

"Fool! Now they know we're here. We've lost the element of surprise. When that Kacheek showed up on this island, we had the perfect chance to impress the boss. Remember, he told all of us that he wanted that Kacheek as bait. Alive, not frozen. And then, from out of nowhere, he lands right in our lap. This was our big chance. And you blew it."

"We can still take the Kacheek," Vizjek protested. "We'll just have to work harder to surprise him."

"Bah!" Rak blustered. Then he threw up his hands and turned away.

Back at the beach, Kyrok and the others were making progress on the boat repairs. "I think we're ready to reattach the sail," Kyrok said when the mast had been secured.

Kyrok, Whelar, Liva, and Angebar each grabbed a corner of the large cloth and spread it

out. "Hmm, the damage is worse than I thought," Kyrok said. "I don't think this will hold all the way to Terror Mountain."

"I have some sailcloth in my workshop," Angebar said, as he set a new board in the bottom of the boat and began hammering. "But I hate to lose time working here."

"I'll go get it," Sarn volunteered. "I'm not so good with a hammer and a nail anyway. This way you can stay here and keep working."

"Good idea," Angebar said, whacking in another nail. "The cloth is in the back room. You can't miss it." Sarn watched as Angebar quickly sketched a map in the sand. "It's rough, but it should get you there," Angebar said.

"I don't know about this, Sarn," Kyrok said sternly. "Be very careful, stay alert, and hurry back."

Sarn nodded, then rushed off the beach and into the forest. Liva called after him. She didn't think he should go, but Sarn was determined,

even after everything they had been through.

Sarn made his way quickly through the forest. As he emerged into the town center, the joyful sound of carousel music caught his ear again. Sarn paused, watching the whirling Unis and the brightly colored lights. For a moment, he forgot about the ghouls, forgot about the shipwreck and the dangerous mission he was on. *One little ride,* he thought to himself. *It'll only take five minutes. Then I'll get the cloth and be back before they know it.* There was no one running the ride, so Sarn hopped on and chose a bright red Uni. Holding on to its single horn he rode up and down, cheered by the motion and the music.

Lost in thoughts of home, Sarn didn't hear the creature approaching from behind.

"Got a ticket, kid," snarled a gruff voice.

Startled, Sarn spun around and found himself face to face with a ghoul—the very ghoul who had frozen the Blumaroo.

Sarn leapt from the Uni and ran right into another ghoul.

"Gotcha!" shouted the second ghoul as he clutched Sarn in a vicelike grip, pinning his arms to his sides.

Oh, no! Sarn thought, as panic swept through him. *This is it. He's going to freeze me. Why did I have to take this ride? Why couldn't I have listened to. . . .*

Suddenly, Sarn's brain cleared as he realized that the ghouls hadn't begun to chant. Instead, they were dragging him toward the forest. *What's going on here?* he wondered.

"Hurry, Vizjek!" the ghoul carrying Sarn shouted. "We've got to get to the boat."

Boat? Sarn thought, still amazed that the ghoul hadn't frozen him. *They have a boat? But where are they taking me?*

"Yeah, Rak. You see, I told you we'd get him," Vizjek said. "Wait until Gnawthral sees this. Maybe he'll make us top lieutenants or something!"

Gnawthral! Sarn thought, shaking with fear. *They're taking me to Gnawthral!*

"Where is Sarn?" Kyrok asked, both annoyed and a bit worried. "He left here a while ago. It should not have taken him this long."

"I hope he's okay," Liva worried.

"Help!" came Sarn's voice suddenly, sounding weakly in the distance.

Liva and Kyrok turned in the direction of the cry.

"There!" Liva shouted, pointing a few hundred yards up the shoreline. She gasped in horror at the sight of a tiny boat floating away from the shore, heading out to sea. She saw the outline of three people in the boat. Judging by the cry, she knew they must be Sarn and two ghouls!

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Now don't go getting any fancy ideas about shoving us into the water." Rak said, as Vizjek shuddered in agreement.

"Why are you doing this?" Sarn blustered as the tiny boat headed farther and farther out to sea, on its way to Terror Island. When the ghouls didn't freeze him right away, Sarn realized that they had no intention of harming him. To his surprise, he found himself filled with a reckless courage.

"You're just bait," said Rak. "Gnawthral wanted you captured to lure some kind of ghost

to him. But he needs you alive and unharmed."

"Too bad," cackled Vizjek. "I could use some extra energy right about now."

"You keep your hands off him, Vizjek!" shouted Rak. "I've had enough trouble with you already this trip."

"You guys have it all wrong," Sarn said, shaking his head. "Gnawthral doesn't want me anymore. He knows that his old enemy Kyrok is coming for him. He doesn't need me anymore. You guys are wasting your time."

"For the last time, will the both of you shut up!" Rak raged.

Sarn slid down and settled in for the journey to Terror Mountain. A terrible thought struck him—once these ghouls found out that Gnawthral really didn't have any use for him, there would be nothing to stop them from freezing him.

He felt an old familiar fear rising up within him.

For the first time since their shipwreck, he remembered his pouch and the magic potions it contained. Reaching down, he felt the pouch resting against his hip. There was nothing he could do here in the middle of the ocean. He couldn't swim all the way back, and he couldn't sail the boat alone. But at least he would have something he could use during his meeting with Gnawthral.

Kyrok, Liva, and their Blumaroo friends worked frantically to finish repairing their boat.

"Why would they take Sarn?" Liva wondered, her voice filled with worry. She helped Kyrok and Whelar attach the sail to the mast.

"It was obvious that they didn't freeze him," Kyrok pointed out. "This wasn't about simply getting another victim to increase their own power. They wanted Sarn. Or rather, Gnawthral does."

"You think they're headed for Terror Mountain?" Liva asked anxiously.

Kyrok pulled out a map. "That was the direction they seemed to be headed, according to these sailing charts from Whelar," he said. "You recall Sarn told us that when Gnawthral had him in the Castle of Eliv Thade, Gnawthral said something about using him as bait? In any case, it doesn't matter, Liva. You and I are going to Terror Mountain. We will rescue Sarn and stop Gnawthral."

"I hope he's all right," Liva said.

"If those ghouls believe he is valuable to Gnawthral, then they won't harm him," Kyrok said. "But what happens, once he's in Gnawthral's clutches. . . ."

Kyrok paused, seeing the horrified expression on Liva's face. "We must hurry," he said.

"Well, your boat's ready," Whelar said, as he finished attaching the final board to the bottom.

"Better than new," said Angebar. "If I do say so myself."

"Thank you both," Kyrok said, as he and the others slid the boat from the shore into the water. "We could never have fixed the boat without your help."

"And I'd be a statue on the beach if it wasn't for you," Whelar replied. "Good luck. I hope you find your friend. And I hope you can stop this madness and free the frozen Blumaroos.

"We will," Kyrok said firmly. "We have to."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Prepare to land!" Vizjek shouted.

"You don't have to shout, you pea brain," Rak grumbled. "I'm standing right next to you!"

Sarn pushed himself up. Peering over the edge of the boat, he saw a huge mountain of gleaming white rising from the sea high into the slate-gray sky. *Terror Mountain!* he thought, as a knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

As the tiny boat reached the icy shore, Vizjek

and Rak jumped out and pulled it from the water.

"Tie up the prisoner!" Rak barked.

"Is that really necessary?" Vizjek asked. "I mean, where is he going to go? He wouldn't last a day on Terror Mountain by himself."

"He could escape from us and leave the island in the boat," Rak sneered. "Did you think of that?"

Vizjek scratched his head. "Uh, no, I guess I didn't."

"No, of course you didn't. But I did. And I did not come all this way only to lose him now. Tie him up!"

Vizjek bound Sarn's wrists together with one end of a long rope, then tied the other end around his own waist.

"Come on," Rak ordered, then he looked right at Sarn. "It's time for you to go to your new home!"

The trio marched through Happy Valley, a snow-covered village at the base of Terror Mountain. Reaching the mountain, they began the long trek upward.

This isn't so bad, Sarn thought as he made his way up.

A short while later, the wind began to howl and snow started falling. The slope got steeper and more slippery with every step. Within a few moments the storm had blossomed into a raging blizzard. Each step became a struggle.

"Like the weather, Kacheek?" Rak asked, snickering to himself. "Well, get used to it. This is the only kind of weather we ever get up here."

As the snow piled up on the icy path, the footing became treacherous. Sarn slipped and tumbled down a few feet, pulling Vizjek down with him.

"Keep up!" Rak shouted.

Sarn climbed back to his feet, stumbling a

few more times before gaining his footing and continuing the steep climb up the mountain. But he was now covered in snow. A chill spread through his body. His hands began trembling. His feet were going numb.

Hour after hour, Sarn forced himself to continue forward. When he couldn't move on his own, due to exhaustion and his frozen feet, Vizjek pulled him along by the rope, his hands extended in front of him, his wrists bound firmly together.

Sarn felt as if he were sleepwalking, drifting in and out of a waking dream. He pictured himself with Liva, the two of them splashing happily together in the Old Swimming Hole near their beloved village of Berkshire Glen. Then a gust of snow-laced wind slapped him in the face, stinging his already frozen cheeks, and his mind returned to the present.

Finally, after hours of trekking, Vizjek yanked

Sarn onto a slick ice ledge. Sarn looked up to see the entrance to the Ice Caves—home to Gnawthral, leader of the ghouls.

Sarn actually felt a sense of relief as he stepped into the cave. At least he was out of the raging wind and snow.

The ghouls led Sarn through a maze of ice tunnels. The feeling began to return to his feet, though it was far from warm in this icy cavern deep within Terror Mountain.

A narrow tunnel opened up and Sarn stepped into a large chamber. A roaring fire blazed beneath a bubbling cauldron, and Sarn could immediately feel heat filling the chamber. On an ice throne beside the fire sat Gnawthral.

"What have we here?" Gnawthral asked, sipping a cup of hot broth.

"We have brought you the Kacheek that you have been searching for, O Great One," Vizjek said with pride, bowing deeply, "the friend of the traitorous ghost."

"What?!" Gnawthral bellowed, slamming his cup to the icy floor. "You fools! I don't need this insignificant Kacheek anymore. Kyrok will seek me out all on his own. I know this, for I know my old friend as well as I know myself!"

Gnawthral lifted his enormous bulk from the chair and grabbed the two ghouls, one in each hand. "Idiots!" he raged. "I have nothing but idiots working for me!" Then he tossed the ghouls across the room.

As Vizjek flew through the air, the rope around his waist went taut, yanking Sarn along with him. Sarn landed on the floor beside the ghouls.

"But, O Great One," Rak said, scrambling to his feet. He was trying desperately to find some way to salvage something from this terrible mistake he had obviously made—not to mention save his own life. "Maybe your enemy will arrive sooner if he thinks the Kacheek is in danger."

Gnawthral rubbed his chin and considered Rak's words. "I suppose a little insurance

couldn't hurt," he said. "And it might bring Kyrok here sooner at that. Very well. Throw him in the ice dungeon, and we will wait for his friend to arrive!"

"With pleasure, O Great One!" snarled Rak, breathing a secret sigh of relief.

He grabbed the rope and pulled Sarn toward him. "Come on, prisoner!" he shouted. "You're coming with me!"

Vizjek, still attached to the rope, stumbled forward as well.

"Will you untie your end of the rope, pea brain?" Rak raged.

"Oh yeah, I guess he won't escape now, huh?" Vizjek said, untying the rope from around his waist.

Rak led Sarn back through a series of ice caves until they came to a long hallway. Lining it were prison cells. Each cell had thick bars made of ice. Rak swung open the door to one of the cells, and shoved Sarn inside. He skidded on the

slippery floor and fell to the ground just as Rak slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Don't even think of trying to break out," the ghoul hissed. "These bars may be made of ice, but they have been here for hundreds of years and are harder than steel. You're going to be here a while. Enjoy your stay." Then he turned and hurried from the prison block.

Sarn waited until Rak had disappeared from view, then, using his teeth, he went to work on the ropes around his wrists. He loosened the knots bit by bit. With a final tug, Sarn untied the last knot. The ropes fell to the floor and he rubbed his sore wrists.

Examining the ice bars that kept him prisoner, he discovered that Rak was telling the truth. The smooth bars were thick and strong. He had no hope of breaking them.

Then he remembered the potions he had in his pouch.

Fumbling for the tiny bottles, he pulled out the last two potions: the Elixir of Levitation and the Potion of Enlargement. *If I still had the strength potion, I could break these bars for sure. If I had the invisibility potion I could slip past the guards and escape,* Sarn thought.

He stared at the two bottles in his hand, wondering how they could help him, and sighed. *I could be in here for long time!*

CHAPTER NINE

"How are you doing with the rudder back there, Liva?" Kyrok asked as he adjusted the sail to catch the maximum amount of wind.

"No problem, Kyrok," Liva replied. "Steady as she goes. The faster we get there, the faster we can rescue Sarn."

The two travelers, having left Roo Island the previous day, were approaching the final leg of their journey to Terror Mountain. Their tiny boat, expertly repaired with the help of the Blumaroos, skimmed the tops of the waves and

speeded along as fast as the wind would take it.

The two remained silent as they focused on guiding their tiny vessel on a straight and true course. A short while later, Kyrok spotted the towering white mountain rising from the ocean. "There it is!" he shouted.

Liva stared at the foreboding land they were approaching. She saw jagged ice cliffs and tall white peaks veiled by clouds. Despite its natural beauty, the place gave Liva a cold, unwelcoming feeling as she prepared to land.

Guiding the boat on to shore, Kyrok and Liva jumped out, then pulled up the craft. "We should hide the boat to make sure it's waiting for us when we leave," Kyrok said, as he and Liva dragged the boat toward a low ice cave. "Of course if we are successful, there won't be any ghouls left to bother us."

Kyrok and Liva pulled the boat into the small cave so it was hidden from view, then hurried through Happy Valley.

"It's kind of nice here, actually," Liva said, rushing past shops and snow-capped trees.

"Yes, the valley is pleasant enough," Kyrok agreed. "But once we start up the mountain—ah, there's the beginning of the trail. Come on. Hurry."

The trail leading out of Happy Valley and up the side of Terror Mountain started as a gradual slope. Snow began falling, gently at first, as Kyrok and Liva made their way up.

Soon the trail got steeper and the snow started falling harder.

"Watch your step, Liva," Kyrok warned. "The extra snow makes the climb especially slippery."

"Is it like this all the way up to the Ice Caves?" Liva asked, careful to shift her weight slowly from foot to foot as she made her way up.

"No, it gets worse," Kyrok said flatly

"Why am I not surprised?" Liva muttered, shaking her head.

As the climbing got more difficult, Liva tried

to focus her thoughts on Sarn, hoping he was all right, and hoping that they would find him. Then she heard a low hum, which grew quickly into a deep rumbling.

"What's that noise?" she asked. "It seems to be coming from above us."

Kyrok looked up, squinting through the steady snow. "Sometimes the ice formations shift, and that can create these noises," he explained.

The rumbling became a steady roar, growing louder by the second.

"But this sounds more like—" Kyrok paused as he peered upward. He spotted a solid wall of snow barreling toward them. "AN *AVALANCHE*!"

Huge snow boulders began falling all around them. Kyrok reached out and grabbed Liva, pulling her toward him just as a giant mound of snow crashed to the ground where she had been standing.

"Hold on!" Kyrok shouted, "We've got to get off this mountain or we'll be swept away."

"But how—"

Before Liva could finish her thought, Kyrok spread his mighty wings. Liva grabbed on to Kyrok to keep from falling, and Kryok took flight in one sudden leap. Liva held on for dear life.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about the whole flying thing," she said, as Kyrok sped away from the mountain. The curtain of snow swept past them. Its leading edge clipped the tip of Kyrok's wing, sending him spinning out of control.

"Kyrok!" Liva shrieked as the whole world spun around and around.

"Hang on, Liva!" Kyrok shouted, desperately flapping his wings to right himself.

Finally, with a powerful thrust of his wings, Kyrok regained control. As he steadied himself he looked down and saw a huge pile of snow resting at the foot of the mountain where they

had first come ashore.

"We would have been down there buried under all that snow!" Liva said, just then realizing how close they had come to being swept right off the mountain.

"Yes," Kyrok said calmly as he landed back on the trail. "Flying does have its advantages."

"Why didn't we just fly right up to the Ice Caves from the start?" Liva asked, letting go of Kyrok. "Why all the climbing and slipping?"

"Trekking up the side of the mountain is the more difficult and tedious way to go," Kyrok admitted.

He sure does have a way of stating the obvious! Liva thought.

"But it is also the more secretive way," Kyrok continued. "We draw less attention to ourselves that way than by flying up the mountain." Without saying another word, Kyrok resumed his trek.

A few moments later he stopped suddenly.

"What is it?" Liva asked.

"I thought I heard something."

The two waited for a few seconds.

"Maybe it was just the wind," Kyrok said. Then he started back up again.

From out of nowhere two large creatures stepped into their path. Covered in white fur, they flashed razor-sharp teeth and fire-red tongues. They growled and pawed at the snowy ground.

"What are they! What are they, Kyrok!?" Liva cried, the panic obvious in her voice.

"Snow beasts," Kyrok said tersely, unfurling his wings. "Stay back. Stay behind me!"

Liva stepped back and lost her footing on the snowy path. She hit the ground and slid down the trail. Instinctively, the first snow beast charged forward, hoping to reach the helpless prey sprawled on the ground before him.

But first he would have to get past Kyrok.

Kyrok grabbed the charging beast, lifting it

into the air, hoping to fly it off the mountain. *Too heavy to fly with!* he thought as he wrestled the beast to the ground. The two combatants crashed into the snow just inches from where Liva struggled to regain her footing.

As Kyrok wrestled with the first snow beast, the second one advanced on Liva, who had finally scrambled to her feet. The beast charged forward, then sprang into the air, its front claws extended.

Liva dropped backward into snow. Looking up, she saw the beast in midair above her, its sharp front claws dropping down, its mouth open, ready to snap.

Got to time this perfectly, she thought. Bringing her knees up toward her head, Liva delivered a powerful kick to the beast's belly, using its own momentum against it. The snow beast sailed right over her and tumbled down the steep mountain. Liva jumped back to her feet.

Meanwhile, Kyrok and the other beast rolled around in the snow. Seeing that Liva was now safe, Kyrok turned himself invisible and broke free of the creature's grasp.

Reappearing right up against the sheer mountain wall, Kyrok waited for the snow beast's next attack. The furious creature charged at Kyrok. It swiped its claw right at his head, but Kyrok vanished again and ducked.

The sharp claw slammed into the snow wall behind Kyrok, spraying chunks of snow in every direction. The creature tried to remove his claw but it was firmly embedded in the snow.

Glancing up, Kyrok spotted Liva climbing up the side of the mountain to a point just above the trapped creature's head.

"Liva, What are you doing?" Kyrok shouted.

"I'm okay. Trust me!" she called back.

Liva braced herself against the side of the mountain, then began stomping hard on a huge chunk of ice which jutted out from the mountain.

Again and again she slammed into the ice shard with her boot, until finally. . . .

CRACK!

The chunk of ice snapped off, plummeting downward and crashing right onto the snow beast. It slumped over, unconscious.

"Well done, Liva!" Kyrok said when they she had climbed down. "He'll wake up later with a pretty good headache. Are you all right?"

"Nothing that a nice hot cup of borovan wouldn't cure," Liva replied, brushing the snow off of herself.

"That, I'm afraid, will have to wait," Kyrok said seriously.

"That was a joke, Kyrok," Liva said, smiling. "We're about a million miles away from the nearest cup of borovan."

"Yes, well . . . we are, however, very close to the entrance to the Ice Caves," Kyrok said.

They hurried up the path. A few minutes

later they came to an ice ledge at the entrance to Gnawthral's ice cave.

"We made it," Kyrok said, as they stepped into the cave.

"Yes," Liva said, following him in. "Now I just hope that Sarn is all right."

CHAPTER TEN

Sarn paced back and forth in his cell, thinking, trying to figure out an escape plan. He came up with nothing.

Footsteps sounded down the icy hallway.

Holding a tray of unidentifiable slop in a bowl, Vizjek appeared outside Sarn's cell.

"Move to the back of the cell," the ghoul said, pulling out his keys.

Sarn stepped back as Vizjek opened the cell door, placed the tray just inside, then backed out and locked the door. His eyes never left Sarn

until he turned and walked away.

He's got his eyes on me every second, Sarn thought as he ate the horrible glop. His spirits sank as he forced another spoonful into his mouth. *Even if I had a plan, how could* I *pull anything off with him looking right at me? Of course if I could turn invisible. . . .*

Then an idea popped into his head. *Maybe I can't actually disappear, but I can make the ghoul think I did!*

A few hours later Vizjek made his way down the hall once more, stopping in front of Sarn's cell. "I'll take that tray, you . . ." Vizjek stared in disbelief at Sarn's cell. It was empty. He saw no trace of Sarn. Grabbing and pulling on the door, he found that it was still securely locked.

"How could he get out?" Vizjek wondered aloud, fumbling for the key in a panic, dropping the tray and spilling the glop all over the icy floor

in the process. "Oh, no. When Gnawthral finds out I'm gonna get it!"

He shoved the key into the lock and flung open the cell door. Vizjek ran from one side of the tiny cell to the other and back again. He realized that in this barren cell there was no place for anyone—even someone as small as the prisoner—to hide.

"Somehow he got out! And I have to find him before Gnawthral finds out that he's escaped!"

Racing from the cell, without bothering to close the door, Vizjek ran off to find Sarn.

Sarn peered down from the ceiling of his cell. He worked hard to hold back a giggle at the sight of Vizjek racing in a panic from one side of the cell to the other.

Having sipped the last of his Elixir of Levitation the moment he heard Vizjek's footsteps, Sarn simply floated up to the ceiling. He spread his arms and legs, pressing himself

against the ceiling to stay as flat and still and quiet as possible.

When Sarn saw Vizjek race from the cell in a panic he knew his plan had worked. He had hoped that the ghoul wouldn't think of looking up to find his escaped prisoner. He had also banked on the guess that Vizjek, believing his prisoner had already escaped, would see no reason to lock the cell door before he ran off to find him.

When he could no longer hear the ghoul's footsteps, Sarn pushed off from the ceiling, floated down to the open door, and flew from his cell.

Kyrok and Liva hurried through the twisting tunnels that led through the Ice Caves.

"How are we going to find Sarn?" Liva asked.

"If they are holding him as bait, he'll be in the cell block," Kyrok replied. "This way. And stay close, Liva. There will be ghouls everywhere."

They turned a corner and found themselves face to face with four ghouls, led by Rak.

"Gnawthral's been expecting you, Kyrok," Rak snarled.

"Where's Sarn?" Liva demanded.

"Ooh, a feisty little one aren't you," Rak cackled. "Your friend is all tied up at the moment, but you'd be wise to concern yourself with your own fate!"

Then he turned to the other ghouls. "Boys! That's the traitor Gnawthral wants!" he shouted, pointing at Kyrok. "You take care of him. I'll deal with the feisty one!"

Rak grabbed Liva in his powerful grasp at the same time that the three other ghouls charged Kyrok.

As the ghouls rushed, Kyrok began to turn invisible. But he wasn't quite fast enough. By the time he vanished, the ghouls already had a firm grip on him.

Liva could see what looked like three ghouls

wrestling with nothing. But even though they couldn't see him, the ghouls maintained their hold on Kyrok, preventing him from helping Liva.

"And now, feisty one, you will provide me with the energy I crave!" Rak announced. Then he began to chant:

Power of darkness, bringer of rage—

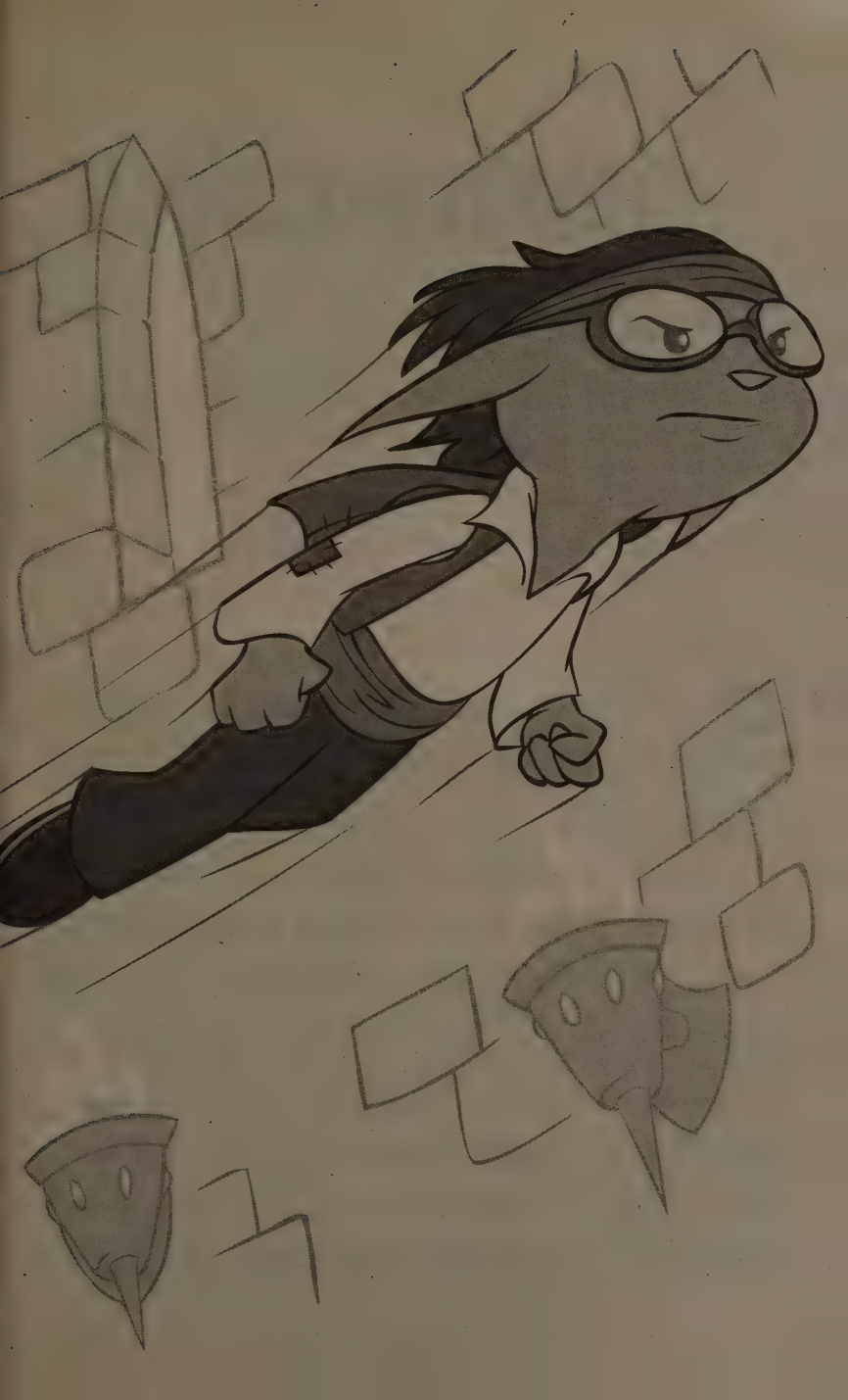
"No!" Liva shrieked in terror, struggling unsuccessfully to free herself from Rak's vicelike grip.

Remove this life force from its natural cage.

Her breath caught in her throat as fear washed over her. She could see the three ghouls struggling, but still Kyrok could not break loose. She was about to be frozen, after coming all this way, and there was nothing Kyrok could do about it.

And when the theft is finished, your strength from you drains.

Then, from out of the corner of her eye, Liva caught sight of something streaking through the air. Whatever it was barreled right into Rak, breaking his grip on Liva and knocking him into the wall.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Sarn!" Liva cried when she saw that the streaking figure was in fact her best friend.

"No time to talk, Liva!" Sarn shouted as he zoomed through the air. "Got to help Kyrok."

Sarn flew over to where the three ghouls still fought Kyrok. He flew into one ghoul's back, causing it to release Kyrok's arm. This was the advantage the invisible ghost needed. He spun away from the other ghouls, freeing himself. Using the cover of his invisibility, he grabbed

one of the ghouls by the arm, spun him around, and slammed him into a wall.

Liva, meanwhile, snapped a long, thick icicle off of the cave ceiling. She swung the ice spear at the legs of the two charging ghouls, catching them at the ankles, tripping them up.

Sarn flew back to Liva. Rak, still stunned and afraid of his invisible adversary, turned and stumbled back down the hallway.

"Sarn, are you okay?" Liva asked, as Kyrok reappeared.

"I'm great!" he replied. "I escaped from their jail and was searching for Gnawthral when I saw that you guys were in trouble."

"You drank the Elixir of Levitation again I see," Kyrok said.

"Yeah, it helped me escape, and I guess now it also helped you guys escape," Sarn said. He could feel the effects of the elixir wearing off and he drifted back down to the floor.

"It's good to have you back, Sarn," Liva said.

"Good to see you guys, too," Sarn replied. "Flying is fun, but this solo hero stuff is not for me."

"We must hurry," Kyrok said. "Gnawthral hoped to capture us. We must now turn the tables on him and find the diary."

He led the others through the maze of hallways. Then suddenly he stopped.

"What is it?" Liva asked.

"Shh!' Kyrok whispered, putting a finger up to his beak and holding up his other hand. "I hear something."

Everyone stood perfectly still for moment. Then all three friends could clearly make out the sound of footsteps—lots of footsteps.

"They are coming this way," Kyrok said. "Quickly!" Then he turned and started back in the other direction.

As he rounded a curve in the hallway he came to a windowlike opening in the wall. Through this hole the sound of marching footsteps

grew louder. Peering out of the opening, Kyrok stepped back, gasping in horror.

"Down there!" he said, pointing at the opening and turning pale, even for a ghost.

Sarn and Liva looked out the opening and were stunned by what they saw. The large, open courtyard below was packed with ghouls.

"It's a whole army!" Sarn cried.

"There are so many of them!" Liva added. "Hundreds!"

"More like thousands," Kyrok replied grimly.

The footsteps from behind them grew louder and louder.

"What do we do?" Sarn cried.

"We've got to continue," Kyrok replied. "We've got to get the book."

He dashed forward, then quickly stopped. Footsteps echoed in the hall in front of them. The shadows of hundreds of ghouls slid along the icy walls, moving right toward them.

"This way!" Kyrok whispered, pulling his

companions into a narrow, cavelike crevice in the wall.

The three huddled together and watched in horror as wave after wave of ghouls marched past them.

"There are too many, Kyrok," Liva said. "How can we fight them all?"

"We have to!" Kyrok replied impatiently. "We must get that book."

"After coming all this way, we can't just turn back now," Sarn agreed.

"They've passed," Kyrok said. "Here's our chance. Let's go!"

The trio dashed from their hiding place and bolted up the stairs toward Gnawthral's lair. Passing another window, Kyrok stopped short, peering down into the courtyard again. Sarn and Liva followed his gaze out the window and gasped. Ten battalions of ghouls, each containing hundred of soldiers, were pouring into the courtyard.

"Kyrok! There are too many!" Liva said again.

"No!" Kyrok snapped. "We must succeed!"

Liva had never seen him so upset.

"They're coming down the stairs!" Sarn cried. "We can't go any farther."

The sound of marching footsteps came at them from all directions.

"We're trapped!" Liva said, looking for a way out.

"Out the window," Kyrok cried. "Now! We'll wait there until they pass." The three companions scrambled through the tiny opening and stood on a narrow ledge.

Looking back through the window, they watched an endless stream of ghouls march past.

"I hope those ghouls down there don't look up," Sarn whispered, glancing down to the packed courtyard below. "Maybe Liva's right, Kyrok. Maybe there are just too many of them."

"We can't leave here empty-handed!" Kyrok whispered tersely.

"We're not empty-handed, Kyrok," Liva said softly. "We rescued Sarn. That mission was a success. If we're captured by Gnawthral's army who will save Neopia? We're all disappointed. But we've got to survive to continue the battle. And we need help."

Kyrok felt helpless and frustrated, but he knew that Liva was right. "Kyrok!" Sarn hissed, snapping the ghost out of his thoughts. "We can't just stand here. We have to escape while we still can!"

Kyrok scanned the courtyard one last time, desperately trying to find a solution. At last, he gave a heavy sigh. "You're right, there are too many of them. We must go," he muttered. The line of soldiers had passed. Kyrok slipped back through the window, followed by Sarn and Liva.

Together they raced down the hallway they had used when they first entered the caves.

As they reached the entrance to the cave,

the trio stopped on the icy ledge near the top of the mountain. Behind them, thundering footsteps echoed through the caves.

"Speed is all that can save us now," Kyrok announced as he started down the mountain path. "We are outnumbered, but the ghouls are slow. We must beat them down the mountain and get away before they reach us."

"Can you fly us down?" Liva asked. "It would be faster, and it's not like it's any secret that we're here now."

"I can't carry you both," Kyrok replied, shaking his head. "We will need to go on foot."

The trio hurried down the mountain path. Glancing over his shoulder, Kyrok saw a steady stream of ghouls pouring down the path from the Ice Caves and chasing them.

Halfway down the mountain, with the ghouls still in pursuit, the group paused at a split in the path.

"Which way?" Sarn asked.

"To the right," Kyrok said. Then he added quickly, "Wait! I have an idea."

The footsteps and growling behind them grew louder.

"Follow me," Kyrok said racing down the left-hand path.

"But I thought you said we should go right," Sarn said, confused.

"Yes, but I want them to think we went this way," Kyrok explained. "They will follow our footprints to the left. Let's just go a bit farther and then we'll return to the other path."

"But won't they see our footprints going back along this path?" Liva asked.

"Not if we don't make any," Kyrok replied.

He spread his wings, enveloped Liva, and jumped into the air. "Wait right there, Sarn. I'll be back for you in a moment."

Kyrok flew Liva to the other path and gently placed her down a short distance from the point

where the path split. He flew back and did the same thing for Sarn.

"When the ghouls reach the split, they will see three sets of footprints going left and none going right. Once they start down that wrong path, it will be impossible to turn around with so many marching behind them. Their own numbers will be their downfall!" After sharing his plan, Kyrok almost cracked a smile.

They hurried down the mountain, and finally they reached Happy Valley. Then they rushed to the small cave were Kyrok and Liva had hidden their boat.

"It's still here!" Kyrok said with relief as he grabbed the boat and dragged it from the low ice cave.

With Sarn and Liva's help, he hauled the boat to the shore. The three travelers climbed in and set sail.

"It seems our little diversion bought us the time we needed," Kyrok said. But as Terror

Mountain receded from view, Kyrok's mood turned sullen once again.

"Gnawthral's army of ghouls is far larger than I ever imagined," he said wearily. "I foolishly thought that we would storm the Ice Caves, defeat Gnawthral, and recover the diary all on our own. Once again, I underestimated my adversary. And now we have lost precious time. More Neopets will fall victim to the ghouls."

"I thought we'd get that book back for sure," Sarn said. "Even after I got captured."

"Sarn!" Liva said poking him in the side. "I think Kyrok feels the worst about this."

"It's all right, Liva," Kyrok said. "We're all disappointed."

"So where are we off to next?" Sarn asked brightly, trying to cheer up his friend.

Kyrok smiled wistfully. "My dear, Sarn," he said softly. "Your spirit and enthusiasm have certainly been welcome during this difficult task. We are headed to the kingdoms of Brightvale

and Meridell, two lands that border each other. Each kingdom has a large army. I hope we'll be able to drum up some support so that we can return to storm Terror Mountain on equal footing."

"All right!" Sarn cried. "We'll have an army of our own! We'll come back here and wipe those ghouls all over the place!"

"Our task will not be that easy, young friend," Kyrok sighed.

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that," Sarn said.

"Long ago, Brightvale and Meridell fought a war," Kyrok explained. "To this day, a great rivalry still exists between the leaders of these two kingdoms—King Hagan of Brightvale and King Skarl of Meridell, who just happen to be brothers. They rarely cooperated before, and the war strained relations even further. If we are to succeed, we will have to convince them to work together and to use their armies to turn the tide

of battle. Only with their help can we defeat the ghouls, so that we may finally complete our quest."

"If anyone can convince them, it's you, Kyrok," Liva said, smiling.

"She's right, you know," Sarn added. "After all, you're the one who convinced me to go on this whole quest in the first place! And that was back before I had spirit and enthusiasm!"

Liva laughed, and so did Kyrok as he set a course for Brightvale and Meridell.

EPILOGUE

Vizjek and Rak cowered in a corner of Gnawthral's chamber.

"Fools and incompetents!" Gnawthral bellowed. "Useless idiots."

"O Great One," Rak began. "I—"

"Silence!" Gnawthral raged. "I am tired of your ceaseless babble. You, Vizjek. You allowed that, that child to escape from our highest security prison. And you, Rak, even with my entire army at your back, could not deliver

my longtime enemy to me. And so once again the ghost has eluded my grasp."

The two ghouls trembled in the corner.

"But the two of you will trouble me no more," Gnawthral snarled, striding toward the two ghouls huddled in the darkness of the chamber.

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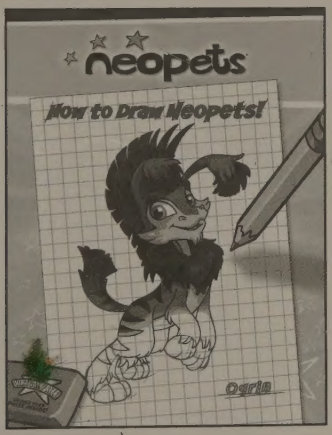

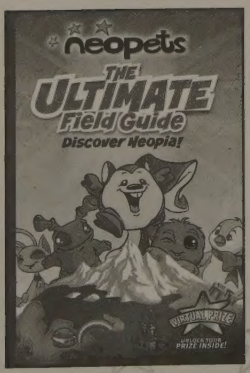

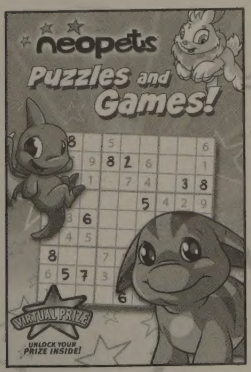

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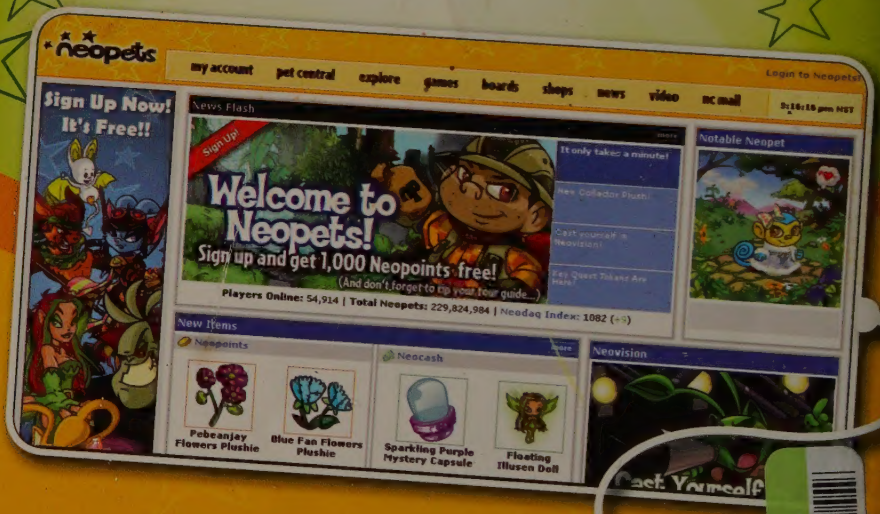

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